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Extreme subjective career success: a new integrated view of having a calling

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EXTREME SUBJECTIVE CAREER SUCCESS: A NEW INTEGRATED VIEW OF HAVING A CALLING

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ABSTRACT

This article develops a better understanding of an extreme form of subjective career success that transcends any particular job or organizational context: having a calling. I review the existing literature on having a calling and related constructs, put forth a new, integrated typology for having a calling, and suggest directions for future research.

Beginning their work in the late 1930s to 1950s, the pioneers of career theory—known as the Chicago School—developed the notion that careers are comprised of both objective and subjective elements. In spite of this early, broad vision of careers, recent career research has been relatively limited in scope. Of the careers articles published in major interdisciplinary journals between 1980 and 1994, more than 75% focused on objective perspectives (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996: 8). Within the last several years, there has been a call for research that includes not only the subjective viewpoint of careers (e.g., Barley, 1989; Derr & Laurent, 1989; Hall, 2002; Hall & Chandler, Working paper), but also the extension of career research beyond the boundaries of single organizations (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996).

There are some notable streams of work, however, that attempt to address these limitations in careers research. Conceptualizations of subjective career outcomes and the relationship between subjective and objective career outcomes have begun to be examined (e.g., Hall & Chandler, Working paper; Heslin, Working paper; Nicholson & Andrews, Working paper), though with conflicting findings (e.g., whether subjective outcomes lead to objective outcomes, or vice versa). In terms of specific forms that subjective outcomes might take, Hall observed that careers have shifted away from being organizational to being protean, a form of career in which individuals are self-directed toward the goal of achieving psychological success—a subjectively defined measure (Hall, 1976; Hall & Mirvis, 1996; Hall, 2002). Hall's notion of psychological success builds on Shepard's view that human potential is realized only through following the "path with a heart," and defining success as a "life fully worth living" (Shepard, 1984). Other researchers have examined what might be experienced by those enacting a protean career or following their path with a heart, such as work engagement (Kahn, 1990; May et al., 1999), flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), and intrinsic motivation (Amabile et al., 1994).

To understand the complexities of psychological success—its characteristics or form, the nature of experiencing it, what its consequences are, etc.—I argue that it is important to focus on exemplars of this phenomenon. Given the implicit prescriptive assumption in this area of research and in the popular press that high subjective success is something to which we should all aspire, this paper will enter this discussion by examining the highly positive end of the spectrum.

What is this extreme type of subjective career experience? It fits with the traditional

notion of what it means to pursue one's vocation, or to pursue one's *calling*. Weiss and colleagues, in their work on calling and leadership, comment on the rising importance of this area of research: "A new interest in the idea of vocation and calling—even though these terms may not be used—is emerging as people search for more humane and meaningful ways to understand their work lives" (Weiss et al., 2003: 6). Several other researchers have made forays into developing ideas about having a calling (e.g., Wrzesniewski et al., 1997; Gardner et al., 2000; Hall & Chandler, Working paper). Naturally, there is considerable overlap in how researchers have treated the sense of calling and related concepts. As yet, though, there is no synthesis of these views or an attempt to understand the range of implications of having a calling. In particular, these implications of having a calling are generally assumed to be positive. I suggest here, however, that there might also be a dark side to having a calling.

Thus, this paper will explore various facets of having a calling, which can be viewed as an extreme form of subjective career success. First, I will offer a brief review of the existing literature on having a calling and related constructs.[i] Then, I will put forth a new, integrated typology for having a calling. Lastly, I will suggest directions for future research, including examining the consequences of having a calling—both positive and negative.

EXISTING VIEWS OF HAVING A CALLING AND RELATED CONSTRUCTS

Several lines of research in organizational behavior and social psychology have dealt with having a calling and differently named, but closely related, constructs: 1) work preferences, which capture the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that affect people's approaches toward their work (Amabile et al., 1994); 2) work engagement and flow, which examine human experiences on an episodic basis through focusing on people's subjective experience of a particular task or activity at a specific moment in time (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Kahn, 1990; May et al., 1999); 3) work orientations—job, career, and calling—that describe individuals' subjective views of what *meaning* they seek from their work (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997); 4) good work, which is not a subjective career construct, per se, but rather aims to develop an understanding of the individual and social factors that promote good work (Gardner et al., 2000; Gardner et al., 2001); and 5) a discerned, conscious sense of having a calling (hereafter referred to as "discerned, conscious calling"), whose characteristics include: work is consciously viewed as a calling, to which we choose to respond; work serves community (not just self and family); deciding involves discernment (listening, reflection, prayer) to know the right path; discovering your "daimon," or quintessential self or genius; and using your "charisms" (gifts) as manifestation of the Spirit for the common good (Weiss et al., 2003; Hall & Chandler, Working paper).[ii]

These existing notions of calling and related concepts have taken major steps in developing our understanding of subjective career experiences and outcomes. However, each construct on its own captures only a subset of the complexities that comprise a calling. For instance, though it seems highly likely that individuals who have a calling are also highly intrinsically motivated, Amabile's work preferences conceptually capture only one portion of having a calling: the internal, personal satisfaction and interest components. Wrzesniewski et al.'s work orientations measure appears to be able to distinguish a general class of people who find their work to be fulfilling, enjoyable, and inseparable from their identities from the rest of the population who work for other reasons. Its weakness, in my view, is that it taps into only the basic elements of having a calling, rather than grasping its complexities. This general logic also holds for work engagement, flow, good work, and even discerned, conscious calling.

In sum, these existing constructs strike me as being well-suited for comparing

populations or professions to one another. For example, the work orientations measure works well for dividing people into three broad categories—job, career, and calling—but it tells us little about the variation among the people within each of these categories. Do these measures allow us to differentiate within specific populations where people who have a calling are most likely to be found? Since these measures were developed for use with the general population, ceiling effects could be expected when they are used with select populations—such as in the arts, the clergy, or medicine—whose career exploration and choices suggest a propensity for having a particularly high calling compared to the general population. As a result of this lack of variation, these measures would not provide useful descriptive or predictive information. Overall, none of the extant notions of calling offers a unified construct or measure to capture the depth, intensity, or slight variations that might exist within the range of people who have a calling. Thus, there is a need for a unification of these viewpoints into an integrated calling concept that is broad enough to apply to a wide range of organizational and cultural contexts and detailed enough to capture the complexities of this intriguing construct. Through developing a more comprehensive and fine-grained sense of having a calling, researchers will still be able to compare populations to one another and they will also be able to explore the possibility that career-related psychological differentiation, which previous measures might have left undetected, can exist *within* a specific population.

HAVING A CALLING: AN INTEGRATED VIEW

From the literature on calling, several central themes emerged. In this section, I build from these themes to propose the seven components of my view of having a calling:

The first major theme, which is included in all of the reviewed constructs except good work, is a sense of passion or enjoyment for one's work. This theme is manifest through deep enjoyment and absorption in a specific task, in the case of work engagement and flow, whereas the other constructs examine enjoyment at a broader level (e.g., enjoying doing a type of work, being in a particular profession, etc.). Thus, the first component in the integrated view of having a calling is a sense of *passion*, or deep enjoyment and satisfaction from engaging in one's work.

Identity is the second important theme to emerge, though it is not as pervasive in this literature as passion. In the discerned, conscious calling view, identity is not *part* of having a calling. Rather, the authors propose a feedback loop in which having a clear sense of one's identity allows one to discern one's calling, and then this sense of calling in turn leads to greater identity clarity, etc. Work engagement, flow, and work orientations touch upon identity, but in a different way than discerned, conscious calling. For them, identity is about the subjective merging of self and work, or the psychological centrality of work in one's life. Unlike Hall and Chandler's relationship between calling and identity, I suggest that identity is a critical aspect of the calling itself. My view of identity has less to do with values, life purpose, etc., and more to do with the degree to which people identify with their work domain or profession. Is the first thing people think about when they describe themselves to others that they do a particular kind of work? Can they imagine a time in their lives when they could no longer be involved in their work domain or profession? Thus, *identity*, in the sense that personal and work identities are tightly intertwined, is the second component of the integrated calling construct.

The third element, *a need to do it or urgency*, partially stems from the discerned, conscious calling view. The ideas of "daimon," "genius," and "charism" [Weiss, 2003 #47] are based on the premise that people possess particular talents which should serve as the basis for our work in the world. I build on this view to propose that when people have a calling, they feel

a sense of destiny about engaging in a particular type of work. This differs from discerned, conscious calling in two fundamental ways: First, whereas Weiss et al. based their view of calling on explicitly Christian ideas, I purposefully define having a calling in terms that *could,* but do not necessarily, include religious ideas. Second, the discerned, conscious calling view proposes that to have a calling, an individual must consciously view his/her work as such and actively discern what one's calling is. I suggest that people do not need to be consciously aware that their work is a calling. Due to the heavily religious connotations of the word "calling," many individuals would refuse to attach the label "calling" to how they experience their work,[iii] yet they can recognize that they possess the *components* of having a calling.

In Weiss at al.'s (2003) view, individuals must discern their path in life. In my view, having a calling may be such a strong force that one may not *need* to discern one's path. Rather, individuals with a calling have the sense that they have always known that they would engage in a particular type of work. Thus, the fourth part of having a calling, *longevity*, highlights my belief that a calling's timeframe is career or life, rather than operating on a moment-by-moment or even job basis, like work engagement and flow.

The fifth element of having a calling is that the work domain *engulfs one's consciousness*. While the definitions of work engagement and especially flow include the notion of losing oneself in one's work, I take a broader view: for people who have a calling, one's work domain is continuously present in one's consciousness.

A desire to do meaningful work is pervasive in the existing literature on calling. However, there is great variety in how researchers have conceived of "meaningful work." As my aim is to have a generalizable notion of having a calling, I do not limit "meaningful" to any specific, externally prescribed *types* of meaningfulness, such as serving the community or achieving particular moral goals. Rather, my view of having a calling allows for a subjective, self-relevant view of meaning. As long as individuals *perceive* their activities to be meaningful or gratifying, then this work *is* meaningful for the purposes of my integrated calling construct.

The last element is domain-specific *self-esteem*. Flow stresses the importance of developing new abilities through tackling challenges, while work engagement broadens this view to include emotional and psychological abilities. My focus is on people's subjective perceptions about their abilities. I label this as domain-specific self-esteem, and define it as people's feelings *about* their abilities in and association with the work domain.

IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

My hope is that the combination of the existing literature on calling and my proposed typology for an integrated calling construct will spark further research interest in this area. In this section, I outline particular aspects of the calling construct that deserve attention.

Can having a calling be measured?

In order to fully understand the calling construct and its relationship to other constructs, it is necessary to be able to measure it. Preliminary findings in a study of young musicians suggest that psychometrically robust survey scales may soon be available to measure the seven calling components (Dobrow, 2003). Given that a calling is assumed to transcend jobs and span long periods of time, longitudinal research in this domain is imperative.

Antecedents of Having a Calling

Existing work on calling—especially popular literature—tends to focus on finding one's calling, as if a calling is a "thing" that is hidden deep inside of us, just waiting to be discovered. The longevity element of the calling construct proposed here suggests that a calling may develop over long periods of time, rather than being a static, often-hidden, part of ourselves. The process by which a calling evolves is not currently known, but future research could examine a host of individual, group, and contextual factors that might shape its development.

Consequences of Having a Calling

How does having a calling affect a person's life? While having a calling could be viewed as an end in and of itself (e.g., as a way of addressing questions such as, "What is my purpose in life?"), I maintain that it is also important to investigate the consequences of having a calling. In all of the calling-related literature discussed in this article, there is an underlying assumption that having a calling is a "good" thing. Experiencing flow, being engaged with one's work, having a high level of intrinsic motivation, and "finding" one's calling are viewed as pinnacles of subjective achievement, whereas not attaining these things is assumed to be less satisfactory. I would caution researchers to examine not only the bright side of having a calling, but also the possible dark side. I posit that there are three general categories that encompass the consequences of having a calling: behavior, cognition, and affect.

Behavior. What types of behavioral outcomes might we expect of people who have a calling? Given the strong sense of passion, identity, and self-esteem that people with a calling in a particular work domain will feel toward that domain, I predict that having a calling will be positively associated with domain-specific intentions and behaviors.

Cognition. Having a calling is likely to have a significant impact on the way an individual views the world. This should be most evident in individuals' perceptions of the domain in which they have a calling—in terms of both the domain itself and about themselves in the domain. I predict that having a calling will be positively associated with "tunnel vision" types of cognitions, which are characterized by focusing on one's own beliefs and ignoring potentially useful outside information (e.g., unrealistic expectations about their own abilities or likelihood of success, ignoring career advice from others, having unclear career planning).

Affect. Given the subjective nature of having a calling, I expect that this construct would have interesting relationships with other subjective or affective constructs. In general, I expect that having a calling will be positively associated with affective outcomes (e.g., job satisfaction, subjective well-being). However, Allmendinger et al.'s (Allmendinger et al., 1996) data suggest the intriguing possibility that having a calling may not be linked with various forms of well-being or satisfaction. Thus, the relationship between having a calling and subjective well-being may not be completely straightforward.

Contexts in which to Study Having a Calling

Given the need to develop a deeper understanding of the calling phenomenon itself, I suggest that researchers initially focus on exemplars, and subsequently proceed to investigate wider ranges of people. Though Wrzesniewski et al. (1997) concluded that the people within the

occupation they studied, administrative assistants, were distributed across the three work orientations, I surmise that there are certain occupations with concentrated numbers of people who have a calling. For example, artists, musicians, humanitarian workers, and non-profit sector workers could be interesting populations in which to study having a calling. Researching relatively untraditional types of occupations, compared to much previous careers research, continues the trend begun by many of the calling research reviewed in this paper.

In selecting populations to study, it will also be important to keep generalizability in mind. Research participants should include those pursuing boundaryless careers, as well as those in more traditional, bounded work environments. Research should also cover a wide range of ages to address both the possibility of lifestage differences and change in calling over time.

CONCLUSION

My purpose in this article was to develop a better understanding of individuals who seem to achieve extraordinary psychological success. This sense of having a calling transcends any particular job or organizational context. My review of the research and theory in this area (work preferences, work engagement and flow, work orientations, good work, and discerned, conscious calling) indicated the need for an integrated view of having a calling that could capture the breadth and depth of a calling and even differentiate within extreme populations. I put forth a new calling construct, comprised of seven elements: 1) passion; 2) identity; 3) need to do it/urgency; 4) longevity; 5) engulfs consciousness; 6) sense of meaning; 7) self-esteem. Using this new calling construct, I made suggestions for future research in this domain. Once having a calling can be measured, its antecedents and consequences (behavioral, cognitive, and affective) can be explored. Having a calling has overwhelmingly positive connotations, and there is some research to support these positive effects (e.g., Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). However, an intriguing question that remains is whether having a calling might have deleterious effects, too.

While there are many approaches that one could take toward understanding connections between people, their work, and their careers, such as objective assessments of the labor markets, the part on which I chose to focus is the subjective orientation that individuals have toward their work domain. This is not an orientation toward a particular job, as would be captured by subjective measures of job satisfaction, for example, but rather it is a general sentiment toward one's career. Understanding individuals' orientations toward their work domain in this regard is an end in and of itself. It will also allow us to predict career-related outcomes. Therefore, this calling construct is strongly linked to the Chicago School's vision of careers as both objective and subjective. By virtue of its breadth of application to any type of career, including across age groups and religions, the calling construct put forth in this article has the potential to be a powerful and intriguing element in understanding the subjective experience of work and career.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM AUTHOR

[i] Additional background information on the relationship of having a calling to existing careers literature is available from the author.

[ii] Detailed discussion of each of these five research streams is available from the author.

[iii] This view is based on field interviews conducted by the author with professional musicians, 2000-2002.